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ABSTRACT

A case study explored issues related to the self-selection of literature in a literature-based reading program. Lori, the student whose selection behaviors are highlighted, was one of 14 students who participated in a 5-month qualitative study in a sixth-grade classroom where the students were able to self-select their reading material. Lori, a below average reader for her grade placement, selected a total of 26 books and completed 18 of those selections. She did not appear to give a great deal of attention to the difficulty level of the material she selected to read. While Lori expressed a continued, repeated interest in animals, this stated interest did not appear to affect her book selections to any extent. She did not fit the stereotypical description of the below-average reader who dislikes reading and is easily frustrated in reading situations. Influences on the reading selections made by Lori were multiple in nature. Lori's paths to literature in the free-choice environment of the literature-based reading program were her own with many contributing influences. (RS)

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Paths to Literature: One Child's Journey

by

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PATHS TO LITERATURE: ONE CHILD'S JOURNEY

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The following case study was part of a five month qualitative research study in a sixth grade classroom where the students were able to self-select their reading material. The purpose of the project was to explore issues related to the self-selection of literature in a literature-based reading program. The authors, titles, and genre preferred by sixth graders were identified, as well as the influences on their selections. In addition, techniques used to make selections and attention to difficulty were studied.

Allowing children to self-select their literature is a basic foundation of whole language philosophy. Children, like adults, have the right to decide what they read. Freedom of choice gives children ownership of their reading and makes the reading process more meaningful and relevant. When this happens children find reading an enjoyable activity and continue to participate in reading and reading-related activities. Self-selection requires teachers to give children more responsibility for their own learning. Since this is a shift from more traditional approaches to the teaching of reading it raises many questions in the minds of teachers.

Lori, the student whose selection behaviors are highlighted here, was one of fourteen students who participated in the study. The paths Lori took to literature are described here in an attempt to give teachers some insight into the complexity of self-selection behaviors of students. It is hoped that this description of Lori will assist teachers in the development and implementation of literature-based reading programs.

Lori

Among the girls in this sixth grade class, Lori was probably one of the smallest in physical stature. While quite verbal with her teacher or me, she tended to be somewhat quieter than some other students in the classroom. She was by no means, however, withdrawn or unsociable with her classmates. She was always neatly dressed and well-groomed. She either wore shorts or long pants, rarely if ever wearing a dress. Lori was the youngest of two children; her older brother was in high school. Lori's parents both worked, and in terms of social and economic background, she was quite representative of the class as a whole.

Lori's family moved into the school district in which the study was conducted toward the end of her third grade year in school. She came from a suburban school in a metropolitan area to the rural setting of this particular elementary school. Lori did not remember a great deal about her reading experiences in her previous school other than that she was taught reading through the use of basal readers. She described "reading groups" and "workbooks and that kind of thing." She could not recall having any opportunities to select her own books for reading. Selection of library books at "library time" each week was the extent of her self-selection experiences.

According to test results from the previous spring, Lori was a below average reader for her grade placement. This was supported by teacher observation. Lori's fifth

grade teacher reported that Lori was slightly below average in her reading achievement level and struggled somewhat with the fifth grade and beginning sixth grade level basal readers the previous year. The classroom teacher's first impressions of Lori in September of her sixth grade year were similar. She felt that Lori was below the average reading achievement level of the class as a whole.

Through interest surveys and conversations with Lori, I found that her main interest was animals, especially dogs. In response to a question that asked if she could have three wishes, she wrote, "To have 100 dogs, 50 rabbits, and 25 horses." On a reading interest questionnaire that used a paired-comparison approach, Lori identified "animal stories" as her favorite kind of book among eleven choices. She stated that she wanted to be a zoologist when she grew up, and one of her hobbies was collecting stuffed animals.

Lori identified reading as one of her favorite subjects in school and noted that "dog stories" were her favorite kind of book to read. In fact, she said her decisions about which books to read were based on "if they have a dog or dogs in it." Lori reported that she read at home "a lot," at least "every other or every night." If given the choice she said she would rather have someone read aloud to her than read herself, but she also said that books "are interesting and fun!" I asked her if she would still read even if her teacher told her she did not have to any more. She said, "Yes. I love to read."

Lori's interest in reading was further evidenced by her actions. It was not unusual for Lori to use her free time reading. On several occasions during sharing time Lori had her book open and would read while others shared. (She always seemed to know what others were saying, however. She would occasionally look up and interject a question or join in a discussion that caught her interest.) Even though she expressed a preference for listening to someone read to her, she would periodically read her book when the classroom teacher read aloud to the class.

Lori's enthusiasm for reading revealed itself both during sharing time and in individual conversations with her teacher or me. Lori was very willing to share what she was reading and volunteered to do so on a regular basis. Most often she shared a summary of the plot. At the beginning of the school year she would page through the book she was reading as she gave lengthy summaries. As the school year progressed she was able to talk about her reading without having the book present. When I would stop by her desk and ask how her reading was going she would stop and excitedly tell me about a favorite part and would even read portions aloud to me. Even though she genuinely enjoyed much of her reading and would say a book was "really good," she rarely, if ever, directly recommended a book to anyone.

The students were allowed to read anywhere in the room and with anyone of their choice, but Lori typically read at her desk by herself. Many times she would pull her desk back away from the others. On occasion, Lori went to the reading center and sat on a beanbag chair by herself or positioned herself under one of the tables by the reading center. Seldom did Lori interact with other students during the silent reading portion of the reading workshop.

Book Selections, Genre, and Authors

During the course of the study, Lori selected a total of 26 books and completed 18 of those selections. These totals were the third highest among the fourteen students in the study. The two students who selected and

completed more books were both above average readers.

Lori selected a variety of books from different genre. Her first 22 selections were either contemporary realism (13) or modern fantasy (9). Toward the end of the study she began reading the *Little House* books by Laura Ingalls Wilder. She read four of those considered to be historical fiction.

As noted earlier, Lori indicated she liked animal stories or stories about dogs. Two months into the study, after a period of self selection, she indicated she still liked dog stories but also liked "kids' problems" or "kids' lives," mysteries, and scary stories. "Kids' lives" was a category the students developed on their own. These stories were ones in which the main character had some sort of conflict or problem to be resolved. For the most part the books that fell into this category were contemporary realism. As Lori became interested in the *Little House* books she indicated she now liked "biography and autobiography the best." Lori applied her understanding of this genre to Wilder's work, which one could logically argue fits the description of autobiography rather than historical fiction. Lori used her understanding of the different genre to classify those books. By the end of the study she was still identifying "scary stories" and "mystery" as favorite types of literature.

Lori identified many books as her favorites. It was not unusual for her to identify the book she was presently reading as her favorite book. At the end of the study, when I asked her what her favorite books were, she indicated the following: *Chocolate Fever* by Robert Kimmel Smith; *More Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* by Alvin Schwartz; *Sideways Stories from Wayside School* and *Wayside School is Falling Down* by Lewis Sachar; *Mystery in the Night Woods* by John Peterson; *Secrets Aren't Always for Keeps* and *Friends for Life* by Barbara Aiello and Jeffrey Shulman; and *Little House in the Big Woods*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and *On the Banks of Plum Creek* by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Lori had also ranked all of the above selections as "tens" when the classroom teacher asked the students to rate the books they had read on a scale from one to ten. When asked which book of those listed was her favorite, she said, "*On the Banks of Plum Creek*." This was consistent with her tendency to identify her present book as her favorite. It was the book she was reading at the conclusion of the study.

Throughout the course of the study Lori selected books by 21 different authors. Only three authors, Louis Sachar, Barbara Aiello, and Laura Ingalls Wilder, were represented by more than one book in Lori's reading selections. Lori identified Laura Ingalls Wilder as her favorite author. By the end of the data collection period Lori had read four of her books and indicated she wanted to read all of the books in the series. During my final interview with Lori I asked her what her plans were for future reading, and she said, "I'm going to try to finish all of the Laura Ingalls Wilder books."

Lori, like many of her classmates, was aware of author style and identified it as a reason for liking a particular author. In an interview with Lori, she told me that Laura Ingalls Wilder was her favorite author. We were talking about the television program based on her books and the books themselves. I asked Lori which she liked better, and she said, "So far I like the books better. They have more detail and I like the way she writes it." From that point on, whenever Lori was asked who her favorite author was, she identified Wilder. When asked why, she would comment on "the way" she wrote and "how she described things." When the students were

asked to write about their favorite authors, Lori wrote:

> Laura Ingalls Wilder is a very good author because she uses descriptive words. She also makes you get so much into her books and she told stories that Pa used to tell the girls. And she told every little thing possible that happened to her. She also has a good way of using her words. She describes everything exciting. She never has a boring part in her books because her life was so interesting. She had really good plots. She also makes you want to cry, laugh, etc.

Laura Ingalls Wilder definitely captured Lori's attention and interest. In a discussion during a sharing session Lori commented to another student, "I think, if I had a life like Laura, it would be real fun."

Difficulty of Selected Material

Lori, like many of the students in the study, did not appear to give a great deal of attention to the difficulty level of the material she selected to read. Level of difficulty did, however, seem to have an impact on whether she completed a selection or put it aside for another book. Lori completed 18 selections that ranged from the second grade to eighth grade level of readability, with an average readability of fifth grade. The eight books she did not complete ranged from a fourth to eighth grade level, with an average readability above the sixth grade level. When I would ask Lori why she stopped reading a particular book, her answer usually indicated that the difficulty of the book was the reason. After she had set *Rabbit Hill* by Robert Lawson aside I asked her why she did so, and she replied, "It was confusing. It was hard to understand. I didn't know what was going on." *Good-bye Chicken Little* by Betsy Byars was another book she did not finish. She told me, "That one was confusing, too hard to understand what was going on." Her answer was similar when I asked why she put aside *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell. She replied, "It was kind of hard to understand. So I just didn't read it 'cause it was too hard to understand."

Lori appeared to focus on her ability to understand a book when judging its difficulty after she began reading the selection. When I asked her what she would look at to decide how difficult it would be to read she indicated the "words" were important. She said she would be able to read one book I showed her because, "I can read the words." Another she said was too hard because, "I don't know some of the words."

Lori provided some possible insight into a common response that I received from her and other students when asked why they stopped reading a particular book. Quite often they would say, "It was boring." On one occasion when her teacher asked Lori what made a book boring Lori responded in her journal, "When a book is boring is when it can get confusing or when I can't understand it or maybe even if they don't talk about fun things. Possibly when the words don't make sense!" For Lori it appears that difficulty definitely affected her interest in a selection.

Influences on Selections

While Lori expressed a continued, repeated interest in animals, especially dogs, this stated interest did not appear to affect her book selections to any extent. As reported earlier, when she was asked how she goes about selecting books she replied, "If it has anything about dogs in it I'll take it." She read only one book, *Oliver and Company* (a Walt Disney publication), that had dog characters. In this particular book the characters were in cartoon format. She also selected

Rabbit Hill by Robert Lawson, which she did not complete. When asked why she read so few books about dogs or other animals she said, "I couldn't find any good ones." When pressed further she simply would shrug her shoulders and repeat she could not find anything that looked good to her, or the ones she found looked too hard. It was one of the few times that Lori, or any other student for that matter, mentioned difficulty as a reason for not selecting a book.

Influences other than Lori's stated interests seemed to have more impact on her selections. She read books that her mother brought home for her, books that were recommended or shared by peers, teacher-recommended books, and books that were made into television programs. Lori also selected a number of books that were simply her own personal preference and decided not to read some others due to particular physical characteristics of the book.

As pointed out above, Lori read a number of selections her mother brought home for her. In all, she began six of these selections and completed five. When I asked her from whom she would most likely take a suggestion for what to read she replied, "Well, maybe my mom." I then asked if her mother knew the types she liked, and she said, "Yeah. I'll tell her to get me a book about dogs, a scary, or mystery, or something." I asked Lori if her mother ever told her to read a particular book. She said, "No. Well, sometimes she will bring them home and say, 'I thought this looked like a good book you might like to read so I thought I'd get it.' So sometimes she does."

The influence of her peers came more from listening to others share books than from direct personal recommendations. In response to a question about where she got ideas for the books she read, Lori said, "From sharing time. If someone else reads it or else if they've read it and I think it's interesting, then I might read it." When asked again about classmates suggesting books she replied, "Well, no one has suggested it to me, but I've read it from sharing." During one sharing session a classmate talked about *How Lazy Can You Get?* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor. At the conclusion of the summary Lori said, "I want to read that book," and a few weeks later Lori selected the book to read. In conversations and interviews with Lori she did not identify any books directly recommended by a classmate. However, an observation of her interacting with Chris and Chris' response to questions dealing with recommendations to classmates revealed that Chris had suggested Lori read *Little House in the Big Woods* by Laura Ingalls Wilder. This led Lori to read several others in the series and, as stated earlier, she was still reading the books when the study concluded.

Lori's teacher and I appeared to have less impact on Lori's selections than many other influences. There were only two or three selections that could be traced to a recommendation by her teacher or a book talk by me. Even so, when I asked Lori who, after her mother, she would most likely take a suggestion from, she said, "You and my teacher." Often she asked to look at books that I highlighted in book talks, but usually she would return them to the classroom library. She did select *Soup* by Robert Newton Peck and *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell based on book talks, and she completed the first but put aside the second after a few pages.

Lori read *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* by Barbara Robinson because she had seen the movie on television and wanted to read the book. Television also appeared to be one of the contributing factors in her decision to read the *Little House* books. In one

conversation about those books she told me, "I've seen all of the TV shows and I wanted to read the books."

Like the majority of her classmates, Lori selected many of her books for no particular reason other than "it looked interesting" or simply "I just wanted to read it." In fact, when I asked if she liked other people recommending books to her she said, "Well, I really like picking my own books out." Lori's personal preference for a book seemed to dominate her selections. As stated above, these preferences were not necessarily tied to any stated interests.

Lori was one of several students in the class who were influenced by the physical characteristics of books. For example, Lori stated on a number of occasions that she did not like long books. Several weeks into the study Lori and I were talking about what she looks at when selecting a book, and she told me, "I look at the title and how long it is. I don't like long books. They take too long. I can read more if I read shorter books." A few weeks later the subject came up again in a conversation. I asked her again why she did not like long books, and she replied, "I get bored. Reading a book for a few days is okay but not for a whole week or something like that. That's boring. It's the same old thing." In one interview I asked her what it would mean to her to find a book that was just right for her, and she responded, "One that's not too long." Her aversion to "long books" changed when she began reading the *Little House* books. When I pointed out to her that three of the books were over 300 pages each and reminded her of statements about not liking long books she said, "Well, I just got so interested in them that I want to read them all." Her dislike for lengthy books did not disappear completely, however. When I commented that long books did not bother her any more she said, "No, but if it was really long like those Tolkein books I wouldn't like that, 'cause the writing is really close, and it would take days to read."

The "close writing" or small print she referred to was another physical feature of books that influenced her decision to select a particular book. When I asked her why she flipped through the pages of books she told me, "Well, I usually don't like it when the letters are too close 'cause I think I'll never get it done. See, like these are pretty good." (She pointed to the words in *Little House in the Big Woods*.) "Like, I don't want them like that" (small print), "totally full like that or I think I'll never finish it." A while later in the same conversation I asked her again why she did not like small print, and she said, " 'Cause I don't like reading them when they are like that. 'Cause I get sick of reading them over and over and over."

Lori used other physical features of books to help in her book selection process. It was not unusual for me to observe Lori in the classroom library or the media center looking at the covers, titles, and backs of books in her efforts to find one to read. Covers, for example, would help Lori decide whether to investigate a book further. I saw Lori, on several occasions, put two books side by side and look at the covers. She would then put one back and read the back of the other, or flip through the pages. In an interview that was designed to determine how she went about making her selections I asked her how she would start to look for a book to read. She said, "Maybe read the title or see what it looks like." I then asked what she would do next, and she responded, "Well, if I see a book that I like I will take it and read the back of it." When I asked her if that was the last thing she did, she said, "I'll flip through the book and read parts to see if it's interesting." Lori consistently used this technique when making book selections.

Another physical feature that may have influenced Lori's selections was whether the book was a hardcover or paperback. All but one of her selections were paperbacks. When I asked her if she realized she had that preference she said, "Yeah, I don't think I got any hardcover books yet. Oh, the scary stories one." When I asked her why she preferred paperbacks she was unsure. She said, "I kind of like them both. I've just been finding interesting books that have been paperbacks."

Lori not only chose more paperbacks but also showed a preference for the location from which she selected her books. A majority of her selections came from the classroom library. The classroom library was dominated by paperbacks and may have been a contributing factor in Lori's selection of that physical format. I asked Lori if she had a favorite place to find books, and she replied, "Probably the classroom library." When asked if there was a reason why, she said, "Not really, no." Further questions on this issue did not reveal any further insight as to why she preferred this location.

Summary

Lori did not fit the stereotypical description of the below-average reader who dislikes reading and is easily frustrated in reading situations. In fact, she felt very good about herself as a reader. One day she was talking to a classmate and told him, "I have read 11 of 12 books already. I'm a fast reader." In most ways she was quite representative of the class as a whole. She read a variety of titles, authors, and genre, covering a wide range of readability. Her attention to difficulty came, in most cases, after she selected a book and began reading. To Lori, like her classmates, interest rather than difficulty was of primary importance in selecting books.

Influences on the reading selections made by Lori were multiple in nature. At times it was easy to identify why she chose a particular book and other times it was quite difficult. She was influenced by a variety of individuals in and outside school, as well as by physical features of books. Most often, however, her personal preference or interest was the determining factor in her final choice of a book. It was apparent that quite often multiple influences were at work at the same time, and sometimes these influences conflicted. Lori's dislike for long books, for example, caused her to rule out a number of selections, but her interest in the *Little House* books overrode this concern and prompted her not only to read several "long books" but also to read books that, according to readability estimates, were quite challenging for her.

Lori's paths to literature in the free-choice environment of this literature-based reading program were her own with many contributing influences. While each individual experience was unique to each child in this study, Lori's experiences were quite representative of those of her classmates, and it is hoped, through Lori, the reader is able to visualize what occurred in this classroom during the course of the study.

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